

Whitla's Dictionary of Treatment

1892 - 1957

ONE thousand nine hundred and fifty-seven began auspiciously for the Belfast Medical School with the appearance of the ninth edition of Whitla's "Dictionary of Medical Treatment." The first edition appeared in January, 1892, and was one of the outstanding medical text-books of its time. William Whitla was 42 years of age, had held the Chair of Materia Medica for about a year, and his text-book on Pharmacy, Materia Medica and Therapeutics had already met with great success. There were "suggestions from many members of the profession, both teachers and practitioners, upon the necessity of appending to it a Therapeutic Indix or Index of Diseases." Many years later he told Dr. Allison that he had written some hundreds of pages of manuscript of the new text-book, but became so busy in his practice that he put these pages aside for some months. When he looked at them again he thought so badly of them that he instructed his manservant to take them and have them burnt in the furnace of a factory not far from his house. By a happy chance, the factory was closed that particular day, and the manservant put the papers on a shelf, where they remained for some time. Again Whitla read them, this time with more pride in them, and resumed his labours. The circumstances of the publication of the Dictionary were possibly unique. It seems to be beyond doubt that Whitla took his manuscript to London, and when the publisher, Henry Renshaw, seemed a little hesitant to accept it, the author explained that he did not intend that Mr. Renshaw should publish it in the ordinary way, but that he, Whitla, would see to the printing, publishing, and distribution, and would allow the nominal publisher a small percentage of the profits in return for the use of his name on the flyleaf. He is reported to have said: "I cannot have the book appearing, written by William Whitla, printed by William Whitla, published by William Whitla: all I require from you is your name on the flyleaf, and I am willing to pay you for it. You cannot lose anything." This arrangement proved a most lucrative one for Dr. Whitla, and may well have been the foundation of his fortune. His acumen in financial matters became the constant cause of the admiration, indeed the envy, of his stockbroker.

His appearance was impressive, even awe-inspiring, but one soon found that he was essentially a simple, kindly man, with a saving sense of humour. His personal qualities, his skill as a physician, and the quality of his authorship did much to establish the reputation of the Belfast Medical School, the foundation of which had been so securely laid by such men as James McDonnell, Henry MacCormac, Thomas Andrews, Peter Redfern, and Alexander Gordon. It is not surprising that this man, who had begun life as a pharmacist's apprentice, and whose undergraduate career had already rewarded him with a gold medal in his M.D. examination, should have achieved the distinction of knighthood, honorary degrees from four universities, and the pro-chancellorship of his own. It is not

only because of his own magnificent gifts and bequests that he is remembered here, and his name is not forgotten in distant lands. It is scarcely surprising that when Professor Macafee was in Shabani in Southern Rhodesia some months ago he was reminded of Sir William's wide fame when he met a pharmacist who has owned the first to eighth editions, and who was thrilled to meet someone "who had shaken hands with Whitla." (It is almost unnecessary to add that Professor Macafee has sent him a copy of the ninth edition.)

The first edition was dedicated "To Professor Gairdner, M.D., LL.D., in recognition of his eminence as a physician, clinical teacher, and scientific observer, of his culture and erudition, of his goodness of heart and nobility of character."

In 1892 Whitla was Extern Examiner in Materia Medica and Therapeutics in the University of Glasgow, where Gairdner was the Professor of Medicine from 1862 until 1900. He was one of the greatest clinical teachers in Scotland, and became K.C.B. and F.R.S. Throughout his long life he maintained his friendship with William Whitla, and during his last illness he wrote to ask him "If there is not among the crowd of new or old cardiac remedies known to him one which could be trusted simply to advance the rate of pulsation without in any way exerting any toxic or deleterious influence when used continuously." After a series of Stokes-Adams attacks he died in 1907. Sir William's copy of the biography written by G. A. Gibson is inscribed on the flyleaf, "In sweet memory of my revered friend." The book "supplied a long-felt want," for Whitla was one of the pioneers of this index method, which made for easy consultation by a busy practitioner." "The Lancet" published a long and commendatory review: "It may at once be said that Doctor Whitla has very fairly succeeded in what might almost have been thought a superhuman task in supplying a book which is intended to serve as a guide to the practical treatment of almost everything that is capable of being treated by drugs . . . as usual, his list is longest where the results are most doubtful and unsatisfactory, e.g., five pages are devoted to asthma, and no fewer than eight diets for diabetes are given in full." In this respect we must remember that in 1892 adrenalin and ephedrine had not dawned on the medical horizon, and that the eight diets quoted for the treatment of diabetes were each associated with the name of some expert of continental reputation. It is pathetic to note throughout almost all these schemes that while carbohydrates are reduced to the utter minimum, fats are given generously; but it is interesting to note that "the writer, in conjunction with Professor Brunton, had recently the privilege of witnessing some important experiments in the laboratory of Professor Lépine of Lyons, in support of his theory of the bipolar action of the pancreas, and there is little doubt but that a distinct advance is being made since his discovery of a glycolytic ferment in the blood." (Sir Lauder Brunton was afterwards the first Extern Examiner in Materia Medica in the Queen's University, and it was not until 1923 that Banting and Best made insulin available in this country for the treatment of diabetes.) "The Lancet" and also "The British Medical Journal" were both critical of Whitla for "an unnecessarily elaborate note on M. Pasteur's method of treating persons bitten by rabid dogs." These are but examples of the prescience which Whitla so often showed, and his

remarkable knowledge of the trend of events in medicine. It is indeed a fascinating book, this first edition. To our modern taste, the style at times seems florid, and even pompous, but in spite of this he establishes a kind of intimacy with his readers, and while he gives many choices of treatment, he almost always expresses a preference based on his own personal experience. Sometimes the drugs he names seem almost mediæval, as they are now so long forgotten. For example, in the treatment of chronic inflammation of the bladder he mentions: *triticum repens*; *alchemilla arvensis*; *uva ursi*; *pareira brava*; *zea mays*, but appears to pin his faith to the oral administration of boracic acid. His human sympathy lights up his pages, as when he writes under the heading of the treatment of gonorrhœa: "Smoking is said to be injurious. The writer has not, however, satisfied himself about this, and, moreover, it is the only solace left to the unhappy victim, who is often so tortured with remorse that his state of mind reacts on his disorder." There is no article on hypertension in this first edition, and indeed increase in blood pressure is scarcely mentioned, except briefly in relation to nephritis. While the first edition was in great demand in the United Kingdom, Whitla published a reprint, with certain amendments of text, in the United States. This was printed in Philadelphia, but it is said that when sales were going rather slowly there he had the remaining volumes shipped to England to satisfy the demand of the home market. Soon an unexpected development took place. Dr. David Duncan Main, a missionary of the Church Missionary Society in China, was so impressed with the Dictionary that he translated it into Chinese, and the second and third editions were both published in Hangchow. As he himself wrote: "I believe that a thorough practical acquaintance with this book is of the first importance to our native assistants and students in connection with medical mission work. It contains everything they require within a small compass . . . the work will fill a want, and supply in almost every case what you have a right to expect in consulting it."

Dr. Main was a Fellow of both the Royal Colleges of Edinburgh and a Mandarin of the Fifth Class in China. The Chinese called him "Doctor Apricot of Heaven Below" (here one's thoughts digress to wonder what parallel names might be chosen for the editors and contributors to the ninth edition). Main also translated into Chinese Caird and Cathcart's "Surgical Handbook" and Playfair's "Textbook of Midwifery."

In 1894 the fourth edition appeared, in the preface of which the author stated that the second and third editions had been published in the Chinese language. It was dedicated to the Reverend Thomas Hamilton, President of Queen's College, Belfast. For the first time, the author had obtained direct collaboration, rather than relying on his own vast and varied experience. It should be remembered that after his period as a Resident Medical Officer in the Royal Hospital in Frederick Street, when "he practically revolutionised the work of that institution," he was attracted to surgery, and for some years assisted Professor Alexander Gordon in all his private operations. Mr. A. B. Mitchell contributed articles on surgery, and Dr. Cecil Shaw those on diseases of the eye, ear, nose, and throat. At that time Mitchell was already operating on chronic gastric ulcer (although duodenal ulcer is nowhere mentioned in the book), and for the repair of perforated gastric

ulcers: "If operation is undertaken within twelve hours of perforation the mortality is not more than 25 per cent., delay beyond twelve hours doubles this mortality." Mr. Mitchell became one of the most successful abdominal surgeons in this country. Dr. Cecil Shaw was a leading ophthalmologist, who was on the staff of the Belfast Ophthalmic Hospital and a Lecturer in Queen's University.

The fifth edition appeared in 1912, dedicated "To British Medical Missionaries in many foreign lands. . . ." It had grown to 1,200 pages, and was the first to be published by Baillière, Tindall & Cox. A new feature—and a most valuable one—was that the sections on gynæcological and obstetric treatment were from the pen of Mr. R. J. Johnstone, afterwards Professor Sir Robert Johnstone. Arterial hypertension as a clinical entity makes its first appearance with a précis of the recent work of Clifford Allbutt. Under *tabes dorsalis* "the writer" states that "there is still more conclusive evidence of the cause being invariably of syphilitic origin," but that "mercury and iodides are of a narrow range of usefulness, and in the advanced stage of the disease they always do harm." "606" was already on trial in the Royal Victoria Hospital. These are only two examples of "the changing vesture" of therapeutics.

The sixth edition is dated 1920, and was dedicated to Sir Richard Havelock Charles, G.C.V.O., M.D., F.R.C.S.I., in recognition of this great Queensman's distinguished services in India. (There is a portrait of him in the Students' Union.) The surgical contributors were the same, and the additional help of Mr. S. T. Irwin and Mr. Wiclif McCready was acknowledged. This edition was little less bulky than the fifth, being 1,053 pages instead of 1,200. That six pages are devoted to the management of scarlet fever indicates the importance and severity of this disease at that time, and one and a half pages are given to chlorosis, a disease now almost forgotten. In his section on disease of the optic nerve he notes that "trephining is urged by Horsley and Risien Russell in every case of cerebral pressure in which choked disc is present . . . in this way blindness may be prevented."

In 1920 Sir William retired from his Chair and his wards, and spent several happy years as the representative of the Queen's University in the House of Commons at Westminster, where he rapidly established himself as a most popular member. He had not lost his interest in therapeutics, for in 1923 he produced the seventh edition—the last to come from his own fluent pen. Again he changed the dedication, this time "To the sacred memory of the five hundred heroes trained at the Queen's University of Belfast who fell in the Great War, and amongst their surviving companions to perpetuate the memory of a victorious comradeship in arms consecrated by so many sacrifices and so much heroism." The format was changed to a larger page, but the thickness of the book rose again, to 1,100 pages. Mr. S. T. Irwin took over the surgical articles formerly contributed by Mr. A. B. Mitchell. It is obviously impossible to detail in a short article all the changes in the text of each succeeding edition, for this would be a history of British therapeutics for sixty years, but here one may remark that it is in this edition that disease of the coronary arteries is first mentioned as "a cause of cardiac degeneration."

It was not until five years after "the writer's" death at the ripe old age of 83 years that Dr. Sydney Allison undertook the formidable task of preparing a new, eighth, edition of this famous old book. In the work of rewriting and re-arranging the text he had the invaluable help of Mr. Cecil Calvert as Surgical Author, and they enlisted ten colleagues, all of the Belfast Medical School, as special contributors. The eighth was larger than any of its predecessors, totalling 1,280 pages, and covered a vast range of subjects. Three great new weapons appear in the armamentarium, insulin in diabetes, liver in anæmia, and the sulphonamides—but there is the emergence of a new enemy, or an old one better recognised, for there are several references to cancer of the lung. A large part of this 1938 issue was destroyed by enemy action, but the authors took the opportunity of reviewing and modifying the text for the reprint which appeared in 1941.

The new, ninth, edition* is virtually a new text-book. Dr. Allison and his new co-editor, Dr. Crozier, wisely decided to limit it to medical treatment, as the many advances on so many fronts would have made the inclusion of surgery, gynæcology, and ophthalmology require a volume so compendious as to be clumsy, or so condensed as to be "tabloid." They have enlisted twenty-six contributors, all of them members of the Belfast Medical School and most of them its graduates. Of the 273 articles, 256 are written by Queensmen. Of these, 16 qualified between the years 1935-1945—no decennium in our history has produced graduates of brighter promise than these ten years. Almost every contributor had the experience of war service abroad or afloat, and both editors served in both wars. It would be invidious to mention any individual contribution where all are good. One pleasing feature of the book is that the articles are, in the main, proportionate in length to the importance of their subject. Another is the uniformity of style of presentation, which may be due in part to editorial expertness; but another reason for this may well be the close companionship in clinical service which has been shared by so many of the authors. They have placed before us in a most acceptable form the current opinions which are being taught in Belfast. Dare it be suggested that some reflected credit is due to their teachers, who were in their turn the pupils of Whitla and Lindsay, of McKisack and McQuitty, and so many others who have created and maintained a high tradition? Whatever the reason, the twenty-eight authors have outnumbered in happy harmony Mark Twain's description of the marital felicity of Brigham Young and his twenty-three wives: "Twenty-four minds with but a single thought, twenty-four hearts that beat as one." If one may offer a criticism it is that sometimes they—the contributors—are too modest to say clearly which of several treatments they personally prefer, unlike "the writer," Sir William, who was more positive in his recommendations. A small suggestion is that in the tenth edition each contributor should place his

*WHITLA'S DICTIONARY OF MEDICAL TREATMENT. Edited by R. S. Allison, V.R.D., M.D., F.R.C.P., D.P.M., and T. H. Crozier, M.D., B.Sc., F.R.C.P. Ninth Edition. (Pp. xiv + 854. 52s. 6d.) London: Baillière, Tindall & Cox, 1957.

initials at the end of each article : it is interesting to know whose pen it is without recourse to the list of authors in the opening pages. The book is a credit to the publishers : its binding, paper, and print are all pleasing, and its price (52s. 6d.) moderate for 854 valuable pages.

In his later years Sir William became greatly interested in the prophet Daniel. For this reason, words from the fourth verse of the first chapter of the Book of Daniel were inscribed on his memorial tablet in Ward 2 of the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast : "Skilful in all wisdom, cunning in knowledge and understanding science." These words had been ascribed by the prophet to certain of the children of Israel, and seemed to describe Sir William. Could he have lived to read the ninth edition, he in turn might well have applied them to his twenty-eight successors.

The Whitla Medical Institute, given by Sir William in 1902, differs in architectural style from the Sir William Whitla Hall of 1941, but such was his progressive mind that he would have loved the new architecture as much as the old. Similarly, he would have loved the new book, which fittingly honours his memory, perhaps most of all because it differs from his first edition—then an innovation—written sixty-five years ago.

It is a very real pleasure to commend this book, which is an achievement worthy of Sir William Whitla's great name and of the place he served so well.

ROBERT MARSHALL.